

Youth, Homelessness, and Embodiment: Moralised Aesthetics and Affective Suffering

David Farrugia

Abstract

This paper explores the process of embodiment for young people experiencing homelessness. Drawing on interviews with 20 young people, I relate descriptions of embodied feelings and practices to the moral and aesthetic regulatory norms which construct bodies in contemporary modern societies. Young people experiencing homelessness are excluded from the private sphere, meaning they are unable to practice the reflexive body practices required of modern subjects. These young people also lack access to consumer goods, meaning they are unable to construct the forms of aesthetic embodiment expected of young people in a consumer society. The outcome of these exclusions is a form of embodied suffering. Drawing on Massumi's concept of affect, I describe the means by which power relations come to constitute embodied feelings, and analyse the emergence of reflexive body practices by young people negotiating the move from homelessness into home. This paper therefore traces the means by which structural inequality is embodied and results in affective suffering for the disadvantaged.

Introduction

This paper explores the process of embodied subjectivity for young people experiencing homelessness. The experience of homelessness involves a disconnection from the resources required to construct and perform the kinds of bodies expected of young people in contemporary modern societies. These young people are excluded from the private sphere, and often lack the material resources required to purchase basic consumer goods. Due to these exclusions, the moral and aesthetic regulatory

norms which all young people must relate to produce a form of affective suffering for young people experiencing homelessness. In order to theorise this process, I understand descriptions of embodied experiences by young people as part of the construction of particular forms of embodiment in late modernity.

Homelessness, Aesthetics, and Late Modern Embodiment

One of the chief characteristics of contemporary modern societies is the decline of traditional or 'given' collective identities based on heredity or class and the emergence of forms of individualised subjectivity characterised by reflexivity. According to Beck (1992), this is a form of modern subjectivity in which individuals are compelled to understand themselves as the authors of their own identities, and actualise reflexive, self monitoring subjectivities in their negotiation of contemporary social structures (Beck, 1992). Giddens (1991) argues that one dimension of this process is the emergence of reflexive practices centred on the body, in which the body emerges as a site of identity work and is constituted as part of the social in this way. Giddens' reading of this situation is optimistic, with a focus on new forms of agency which he argues can emerge from the decline of traditional identities. However, other authors have argued that rather than a form of agency, this process results in the construction of new forms of embodied inequality mediated by the market in consumer goods.

With the decline in 'given' identities, consumption takes on a new significance as one of the primary means by which embodied subjectivity is constituted and recognised, leading to the embodiment of individualised social inequalities. In this context, the body becomes an aesthetic object to be constructed through consumption. According to Featherstone (1984), the consumption of embodied identities results in a conflation of aesthetics and subjectivity, in which the visual body is moralised as a signifier for the inner self. Each individual is responsible for consuming the right kind of body for the visual consumption of others, and those who do not are stigmatised. In this way, consumption practices are the embodiment of inequality, since as Bourdieu (1984) demonstrates, the practice of consumption is one of the ways in which class differences are reproduced. Those who lack the material resources and cultural training required to properly consume goods associated with taste or style are not

recognised as intellectually or morally worthy. In an individualised society, bodies who do not consume correctly are associated with irresponsibility and moral inferiority (Bauman, 2007). “Looking good” is equated to “being good” and “feeling good”.

Despite the importance of these insights, it is this aspect of feeling that is neglected by theorists of the late modern body. Authors such as Bauman identify particular modes of embodiment and the moral imperatives associated with the construction of contemporary bodies, but have little to say about what it feels like to be a body. In order to understand this, I turn to Massumi’s concept of affect (2002), which describes the visceral feelings of the body as a part of the social world. For Massumi, subjectivity is not merely articulated, but felt in the body. Affect describes a process whereby visceral sensations reflect and become a part of social relations. Sensuous feelings are the outcome of the social relations that a body is part of, and hence affect describes felt subjectivity as a dimension of the social. Drawing on this perspective, Featherstone (2010) and Langman (1992) both argue that consumer goods distribute affect as well as discursive or symbolic meanings, implying that consumption changes how a body feels.

Against this backdrop, this paper explores the embodied experiences of young people who are excluded from the resources required to meet the aesthetic requirements of late modernity. Young people experiencing homelessness lack access to the private sphere, and are thus excluded from the means to practice the reflexive body techniques required of late modern subjects. They also lack the resources needed to meet the aesthetic standards of a consumer society. Drawing on qualitative interviews with young people in Melbourne conducted in 2009, I examine the embodied consequences of these exclusions.

Young Homeless Bodies

Participants in this project lacked access to a private home, and to consumer goods. Their accounts of forms of embodiment experienced while homeless assemble aesthetics, hygiene, and morality into descriptions which convey the feeling of homelessness. This feeling was a form of embodiment with affective consequences

that amounted to a form of suffering. In the following narrative, Melissa describes the embodied consequences of homelessness:

I think the clothes I wear and the way that I look, and I also haven't slept, I smell of stale cigarettes and someone spilled coffee on me...People dismiss you as some kind of you know bum, and think of you as sub human basically...I experience it with pretty much everyone. Like, I was on the tram this morning...it was full of people travelling to work and they just gave me a really dirty look and kind of turned their nose up at me.

It's a feeling you get. When you sit down next to someone they kind of you know put their purse aside or briefcase and kind of just give you a dirty, well I keep saying dirty looks but that's one big part and also they glance at you and then they cough or pretend like you're making this kind of offensive odour or whatever. Or they stand away from you too. As soon as they see someone who's homeless or resembles being homeless they think you know 'you don't have a job you know you're lazy, all that other stuff'. Like just your generic bum stereotypes. They don't want to help themselves and it's just complete waste aways and just drink all day, blow all their money on booze and drugs.

In this narrative, Melissa describes the consequences of her inability to practice the kind of reflexive body techniques required to accomplish a properly aestheticised body. She describes this experience in terms of the dirt and odours that constitute the public expression of her embodiment. Melissa's description of the responses of others to her presence is the description of a form of moralised aesthetics which constitutes her body as offensive and unwanted. In this description, by performing a body which does not meet the aesthetic demands of public interaction, Melissa is positioned as "some kind of bum," a person whose lack of control over their body comes to represent a lack of control over themselves – they are lazy, irresponsible, and addicted. The dirt and smells that Melissa describes become signifiers for the irresponsibility which characterises what Melissa calls "your generic bum stereotypes". Moreover, Melissa is not only describing her body as an object, but an embodied experience of what from her perspective amounts to public denigration. In saying "it's a feeling you get," Melissa describes the sensation of feeling morally

judged for the form of aesthetic display that her body has become. Aesthetics, structural inequality and discourses of personal responsibility intersect to create Melissa's affective feelings.

These processes can also be seen when young people imagine leaving homelessness to make homes of their own. In this case, aesthetics, embodiment, and personal responsibility intersect in different ways as young people imagine new embodied subjectivities. At the time of the interview, Mark was literally homeless, living in an abandoned warehouse. When I ask Mark what the most important thing he wants me to take from our interview is, he discusses often feeling judged on the basis of how he looks:

Just to treat everyone, like get to know them first. Don't just judge them by their looks. Too many people do that and I just hate it.

Mark says that in day to day life, he feels that the way he looks means that he is positioned by others as morally culpable and judged as "bad". When I ask why he thinks this Mark says that it is a feeling:

I just feel it...You feel it. And you feel what they're thinking as well.

For Mark, the affective consequences of his inability to perform what he felt was a publicly acceptable body was a feeling of moral judgement. This is a consequence of his individualised experience of homelessness, meaning that Mark attributes his homelessness to personal incapacity. He said that he had low self esteem, and attributed his inability to find a home to this low self esteem and a failure to control his life. Later Mark discusses the importance of having access to a space to shower and shave, saying "Well it gave me a bit of self esteem. Made me feel better as well." When I asked what about himself would change if he was able to make a home of his own, Mark refers to the importance of aesthetics for an imagined new identity:

Just change everything. The way I dress, look. Because I never used to look like this.

What did you used to look like?

Um done my hair...no facial hair, dress nice.

Again, aesthetics and moralised personal responsibility constitute Mark's feeling of judgement and consequent low self esteem, resulting affective suffering. Mark's plans for a future identity describe a reworking of these norms to imagine a new form of embodiment that would provide him with self esteem. The following narrative from Emma describes such a reworking.

Emma, who after ten years of literal homelessness was able to make a home with the help of homelessness accommodation services, was in the process of achieving aspirations similar to Mark's. As the following narrative demonstrates, this process involves reflexive body practices. At the time of the interview, Emma was living in an accommodation service which provides homeless young people with a lease on their own private apartment. Before Emma had even sat down and discussed the interview with me, she started showing me new clothing that she had just acquired, pointing out its quality and recognisable brand ("Rusty"). Early in the interview Emma describes her efforts to create a new identity for herself after securing accommodation:

I'm doing something now to actually fix my life up. Like as you see a nice piece of clothing I'll get...I'm trying to do something to try to better my life. But most homeless people don't do that. And some of them don't give a damn, they just think "oh everything's just a free ride" well it's not just a free ride, you can't scam everything and free ride you know. You've actually gotta better yourself and you gotta think "alright I can get cheap clothes but they're good clothes". All my clothes here they're all second hand and they all look good.

I just thought okay I'm gonna look at my wardrobe. I chucked out all my clothes and then I went shopping and I thought "alright, I'm gonna get top brand stuff, I'm gonna get stuff that I like, stuff that looks fashionable, stuff that looks good, and I'm gonna build a new style for myself". And then what I started doing is I started eating healthy. I spoke to doctors, I said I wanna talk to you about my diet, and about my lifestyle cos I feel like there's, you know

*something's wrong and you know I'm trying to better my life what do I do?
And the doctor started saying "look you gotta eat a lot of fruit, vegies and well
meat, so you can balance out your diet and that but you gotta limit how much
you eat and that and you gotta have plenty of exercise" and that and it helped
me get better.*

As in Melissa's narrative, Emma's discussion of her efforts to move out of homelessness assembles aesthetics and moralised personal responsibility into a new form of embodied subjectivity. Emma characterises "most homeless people" as "free riders" who fail to take personal responsibility for their appearance and their lives, and later in the interview says "*I can't believe I used to be like that.*" Like Mark, Emma understands her homelessness in individualistic terms, but her new home means that she is reflexively constructing a new identity. One important dimension of this is a new form of aesthetic embodiment which acts as a signifier for this responsible subject position. Her consumption practices are reflexive efforts to distance herself from a past identity and construct a new self. Emma changes the clothing and food she consumes, and draws attention to the aesthetic qualities of the branded clothes she buys. She emphasises that she only eats healthy food. Later in the interview she describes the limited number of places she buys food from, and the various healthy options available at these shops. Her reasons for limiting her consumption to healthy food refer to aesthetics and the body:

*I mean if you're eating a lot of junk food you can imagine how crap you look,
you have low energy you know, you look like you got hit by a bus or
something, and the only reason why I go to all these healthy places is because
I want to look healthy, I want people to look at my skin and think "wow that
person looks good" you know what I mean? So I try to eat as much fruit as I
can.*

Emma's narrative describes a change in embodied subjectivity, from a body defined by the aesthetic and moral implications of homelessness, to a body that is aesthetically pleasing, signifying personal control. In Emma's narrative, she treats her body as an aesthetic object, constituting a mind / body dualism which is not pre-socially real, but nevertheless emerges as an effect of the power relations that she is negotiating. The

body and embodied subjectivity that Emma experienced while homeless was, to her, aesthetically displeasing and unhealthy, signifying personal irresponsibility. The person that creates Emma's new body is the individualised, rational consumer who constructs an aesthetically pleasing body which can be seen and appreciated by others. It is from the perspective of this subject position that Emma reflexively constructs her body. The consumer goods that she is able to reflexively consume constitute a new form of embodiment: Emma's feeling of "getting better" is the affective consequence of her movement into this new embodied subject position. However, this subject position is also a structural position. Emma is only able to actualise this form of reflexive subjectivity because she has access to a home. This allows her the privacy and stability to accumulate consumer goods and practice reflexive embodiment.

Youth Homelessness, Embodiment, Reflexivity.

In this paper I have demonstrated one dimension of the experience of homelessness in an individualised social context. As Beck (1992) points out, one of the consequences of individualisation is that structural phenomena are experienced as personal crises. This paper has shown that the compulsory individual responsibility that characterises late modern forms of subjectivity extends to the body as an aesthetic object. Indeed, the narratives of Melissa, Mark and Emma describe a process whereby bodily aesthetics become a signifier for personal characteristics, in particular responsible self control. The notion of responsibility becomes a moral regulatory norm in an individualised social context, and gives meaning to the aesthetics of the body to create affective feelings that reflect power relations. The process of consumption involves the reflexive mobilisation of consumer goods to constitute the body as an aesthetically pleasing object, creating new forms of affective embodiment.

Consumption practices therefore act as the means by which structural inequalities are embodied and result in affective suffering for the disadvantaged. Since young people experiencing homelessness are effectively excluded from consumption, their felt subjectivity reflects this exclusion. It is only when young people achieve homes of their own that they are able to accomplish the kinds of bodies expected of young people in contemporary modern societies. Rather than a form of agency, reflexivity is

therefore a form of subjectivity which is an outcome of power relations, and is the means by which young people are constituted as late modern embodied subjects.

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